

Steering and Guiding through the Tide: Thoughts on the Teacher's Role and Motivating Japanese Students in Foreign Language Classes

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Teachers of any subject and at any school level are doubtlessly and at times even painfully aware of that fact that there is no universal concept of the best teaching method. Each student and each class has their own needs and personalities of which the teacher has to take care. This missing of a universal guideline on the other hand does not necessarily have to be negative. It is this non-existence of such a golden rulebook which makes the profession of teaching so exciting. It offers, at least in my case, an immense freedom in my work and furthermore poses a highly satisfying and daily challenge in each class.

This article attempts to provide readers with a glimpse of my personal teaching strategies and philosophy for Foreign Language classes¹ held at Japanese universities. I do not claim that this teaching style and philosophy are in any way superior to any other strategy or philosophy. What is being described here is simply an approach which has been working for me since I started teaching languages.

Educational and Professional Background

Each teaching style and philosophy is the result of the teacher's personality, experiences, and professional training. In this section, I would like to give the reader some information about these points which I regard as fundamental to my teaching approach.

My majors at university were English Literature and Linguistics, as well as German Literature and Linguistics. I graduated with a 1. Staatsexamen degree; a teaching certificate for the German Gymnasium. In Germany's highly competitive education system, the Gymnasium prepares students for taking an exam whose passing qualifies them to enroll in a German university. The 1. Staatsexamen degree is also recognized as a Master's degree.

German universities offer their students' academic freedom in which students are free to choose their courses with the exception of a small number of courses which are necessary to gain qualification to take final exams. As German universities usually provide no guidance, new students are generally confused how to approach their academic studies. Because of this many students fall behind for at least one year which could be avoided with some basic guidance from

¹ When from now on referring to 'classes', I will be talking about language classes taken by Japanese students during their first and second year at university and not about 'seminars'.

the university.

A remaining memory of my student days is the condescending and hostile reaction of my professors and university staff I approached with questions concerning this aforementioned problem. Their uninformative answers implied, 'If you don't know your way around, you should consider quitting university' at times. Experiences like these have been the reason that my most essential principle is to be open to students' questions under any circumstances.

A problem of teacher education when I was a student was the lack of practical training throughout the six years of university education. At that time, aspiring teachers were supposed to acquire teaching experience during a two year internship at a school they were assigned to after graduating from university².

Interested in the practical aspects of teaching, I managed nonetheless to receive thorough practical training and teaching experience at an early stage. Starting in my second year at university, I undertook internships at my university's Department of German as a Second Language and several Goethe Institutes³. During my summer vacations at university I also taught German as a second language in courses for adult learners and youths.

In an internship at a Goethe Institute located in Germany I learnt how to professionally plan and teach adult classes with participants from different countries and cultural backgrounds. In an internship at the Goethe Institute in Kyoto, I acquired insight and experience in planning and teaching classes targeting the needs of Japanese learners. Besides these internships I attended special seminars held by Goethe Institute Munich, designed for teaching German as a Foreign Language to young adults from 14 to 18 years of age. After this unofficial teacher training, I taught German as a foreign language at several international summer courses for young adults and adults held by the Goethe Institute. All these experiences have become highly influential in forming me as a teacher from planning and executing classes to dealing with the individual needs of my students.

Teaching at a Japanese University

I would like to continue with a statement which will doubtlessly raise the eyebrows of many teaching colleagues. In my opinion, in order to establish an efficient learning environment for Japanese students, a classroom cannot be a democracy and the teacher needs to be 'a benign dictator'.

To support the claim of this admittedly highly controversial statement (or rather to

² Pedagogical studies were also no part of German universities' teacher education: In order to be admitted to take the 'Staatsexamen' exam, students were required to attend for one semester one seminar in 'Pedagogical studies'.

³ 'Goethe-Institute' is a German culture and language mediating institution similar to the 'British Council'.

amend it), I would like to give the following example. Generally speaking, a foreign teacher who has not personally gone through the Japanese education system cannot possibly in his classes at a Japanese university recreate a Japanese classroom or learning atmosphere. When planning classes, a foreign teacher can only base his teaching approach on his personal learning and training experience gathered outside of Japan. In short, a foreign teacher creates a non-Japanese learning environment and hereby forces, although not consciously, his cultural background on his Japanese students.

For many Japanese students, who only know their school system, this might come as a shock at first. For example, a Japanese teacher communicates differently with students from a foreign teacher. Reprimanding students in a manner appropriate in the foreign teacher's home country might be regarded as an overly aggressive act by Japanese students. Jokes made by the foreign teacher are sometimes misunderstood as seriously meant comments. These are just two examples of situations I faced and still sometimes am facing in some of my classes.

Nonetheless, in order to teach Japanese students 'global thinking', I do not regard such a culture shock as negative. In my experience though, given sufficient guiding, Japanese students adapt quickly to this new teaching environment and its rules.

While some Japanese students seem to regard tardiness and especially sleeping in class as no grave matter, I do not tolerate this. In each class at the beginning of the semester students are told in no uncertain terms that disregarding both will result in consequences which also include failing the course. In this context it is important to point out that students are not just presented these rules without any explanation, but are explicitly told that being late to class is not only disrupting to the flow of the lesson, but also disturbs their classmates. Furthermore, students are being told that in their future profession or even their part-time jobs, they would also not be allowed to be late for work. As to sleeping in class, students are told that I regard this behavior as highly rude as it signals disinterest towards the class as well as expresses disrespect of the teacher.

(a) Meeting students for the first time: The most important class in the new semester

Contrary to my statement of teachers having to be benign dictators, I regard the teacher's utmost role to be a guide who steers the class through the learning process. Regardless, before this role is being established, it is important to fortify the teacher's authority as the guiding power in charge of the classroom.

In this context, when meeting my new students for the very first time, I am presenting at first my authoritarian side; a role I am slightly uncomfortable with. This gives students an admittedly rather bleak outlook on how the class might be conducted in the future. During this period in which probably all students are in shock, general rules for the class as mentioned

above are explained.

By the end of this stage, I gradually begin to switch from authoritarian teacher towards the role of the guide. Going through the class list, addressing each student individually introduces the steering guide whose wish and duty is to make the course as enjoyable and profitable as possible. This attendance call should be imagined as an informal chatting with students. Here I am showing clearly, that I am interested in each of my students' individual backgrounds and do not regard them as anonymous units.

In this phase I am also stressing repeatedly that my class is intended for the students' profit; which means that their input in the syllabus is of great importance. Students are encouraged to contribute ideas on what they would like to learn or what activities they would like to do in class. I explain to the students that in spite of my efforts to offer the best performance possible, the course's success will ultimately depend from students' contributions and input.

If I were to describe the perfect routine of such a first class, it would be the form of a semi-circle. At the beginning there would be shocked students after meeting an overly strict teacher and at the end smiling students leaving the classroom who I hopefully feel are looking forward to next week's lesson.

It should also be mentioned, that this approach of 'authoritarian teacher morphing into friendly guide' has not been developed by me. It was actually the strategy of a former English teacher of mine at my university who was a lecturer hailing from New Zealand and awarded several prizes for teaching excellence.

(b) Concept of Teaching

Many Japanese students I met during internships told me that they regarded their English classes at university as too grammar-orientated with little chance to actively use English. With this in mind, my classes are designed as student-centered communicative courses with a focus on an active use of English. From the first class on, students are encouraged to speak as much English as possible. Instead of excessively focusing on pronunciation and grammar, students are told to keep the communication flowing.

Three of my major strategies are (a) pair or group communicative activities, (b) desks arranged so that students can see each other, and (c) actively approaching students. These strategies have proven themselves as highly useful in not only lessening students' reticence to use English, but also in creating an efficient and positive learning environment.

Pair or group communicative activities are especially used in classes with a greater number of students and are an important part of my lessons as they offer each student a chance to speak English. To ensure that students really try to speak English, during the course's first session, I explain that pair activities can only become a success if all participants use English.

Therefore, students who are not adhering to this 'English' only' rule cheat their classmates of important practice time. For extremely shy students who might at first feel too much pressure, during the first units of each new course a 'panic chair' is prepared. Here they can take a short break in case of sincere 'panic attacks' during such pair activities (although up to now, in none of my classes has this 'emergency exit' ever been used).

In this context, my background of being a non-native English teacher has shown itself to be an advantage. Having also learnt English via pair activities, I am aware of the awkward feeling speakers of the same mother tongue have when communicating in a foreign language. Telling students before pair activities that long ago I also had to practice English in such a way seems to relieve the awkwardness some students might feel. It is doubtlessly a very subjective statement, but in classes where I do not mention this personal experience, students usually seem to take much longer to warm-up during pair activities.

Arranging desks in the form of a quadrangle with one side open towards the blackboard is also a very important strategy I am using in my classes, offering several advantages. Besides giving me enough room to move freely between students, it also keeps students from hiding in the back of the class. Students can see each other and work together, even when sitting at opposite sides of the room. Arranging the desks before the class starts, keeps students from coming late as usually everybody helps with moving desks. Arranging the desks has also become a kind of 'pre-class ritual' which sets the mood for the lesson.

My teaching style relies heavily on actively approaching students and tutoring them depending on their individual personality. In order to make students actively participate in class, my preferred way of teaching is to not stay in front of the class, but to freely move around in the classroom. When addressing the class, instead of asking *Who knows the answer?* the question is *What is the answer?* I also try to provide weaker students with confidence builders by asking them easier questions, while more out-going students and those with a better command of English are challenged with more difficult questions. According to students' feedback received in questionnaires and personal conversations, most students do not regard this way of making them participate in class as a form of pressure. I believe this approach avoids the biggest problem many Japanese students face in classroom situations which is overcoming their own shyness. When I started teaching at Japanese universities, I was at first surprised about students' lack of interest in actively participating. In most of my classes, whenever I asked for an answer there was no reaction. I felt this especially frustrating, as the atmosphere of all of these classes was otherwise very positive and students were working very well during group and pair activities. It took me a while to realize that this seeming disinterest in actively participating was not a matter of students having a negative attitude towards the class. The problem was rather that students were either not used to speaking in front of their class or simply too shy and not

wishing to stick out. Actively addressing each student with questions that challenge them has solved, again at least in my case, this problem. Another advantage of moving freely around in classroom and picking students to answer questions is that this keeps students alert as they might be asked for an answer at any time.

(c) Raising students' international awareness

Finally, while my language classes' primary goal is to improve students' English skills, my classes also intend to help students acquire an international perspective, for instance, learning how to deal with different cultures and mentalities, making them interested in visiting foreign countries, and understanding the importance of learning foreign languages.

During the last few years I have noticed a steady decline of interest in foreign countries and cultures among my students⁴. Most of them have never visited a foreign country. Some even admit to not having any intentions to do so in the future. The biggest three reasons given to me are (a) *going abroad is inconvenient*, (b) *outside of Japan is dangerous*, and (c) *I can see everything on the internet (sic)*. Especially with this background, I regard developing students' interest in foreign countries and cultures as a very important part of all of my classes.

Hailing from Europe, I often tell students about my hometown area in south western Germany located about ten minutes from the French border and twenty minutes from the Swiss border. With my stories about meeting people from different cultural and national backgrounds and mentalities on a daily basis, I intend to raise students' cross-cultural awareness. Additionally, students should also understand the importance of having a working command of several foreign languages. With the Japanese economy steadily relying on foreign markets and international cooperation, cross-cultural awareness and foreign language competency are skills Japanese university graduates will need for their successful job search. One of the most important goals of my classes is to make students aware of this fact.

Summary

This paper has shown, briefly, aspects of my teaching philosophy and strategy. Due to space limitations, many aspects could not be described as deeply as I would have wished. As this paper is also based on personal experiences and not on scientific research, there is admittedly a lack of scientific backup of some of my points. The strategies and philosophy presented here represent a very personal approach which I consider to be working for me, but

⁴ Data procured by Tokushima University's 'International Section' clearly document the decline of the number of Japanese students studying abroad: Data from 2006 to 2009 show a steady decrease from an already meager number of 32 students to down to 19 students. These data certainly give no information about the reasons why there are few students studying abroad. Nonetheless, these generally low numbers of students going abroad seem indicate that studying abroad may be regarded as not necessarily appealing to students.

which otherwise might not suit others. I fully understand that some colleagues might even disagree with my philosophy and teaching approach.

While some points presented here are admittedly controversial or unorthodox, I feel that my teaching style and philosophy receive the approval of most of my students. Positive feedback provided by students in university surveys might hint at the efficiency of this approach.

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